

Editor's Introduction: Modernism and the Everyday

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Sitting in the first of the two sessions on the everyday at the fifth Modernist Studies Association conference in Birmingham, England my thoughts, stimulated by three engaging papers, also ranged over more mundane matters.¹ This was no reflection on the papers themselves. For what does modernist prose teach us if not the capacity of consciousness to think of more than one thing at a time. I was momentarily distracted by the sight of a well-known critic's leather jacket and began musing on the symbolism of that familiar item of academic clothing. That worn by a famous Marxist critic, I was once told by my leather-jacketed PhD supervisor, had an audible authority. It creaked. The comment was, I reflected, moving further into my reverie, the kind of sartorial criticism that is sadly absent from contemporary research training programmes. At the same moment, I experienced a sense of loss. I realised that, travelling down to Birmingham early that morning, I had left my own leather jacket on the Manchester to London train. As soon as the session was over, I rushed back to my hotel room and rang lost property at Euston Station, the train's final destination. I was relieved and somewhat surprised to be informed by a remarkably helpful and cheerful woman that my jacket had been found by one of the cleaners and handed in. It could be collected at any time in the next twelve weeks. The next time I was due to go to London, I set off jacketless and picked it up when I arrived.

Thinking about the episode before the next session on modernism and the everyday, which I was chairing, I was struck how the incident seemed to touch on several aspects of the ordinary modern. The object at its centre is both a routine item of wear and saturated with symbolic meaning.² It was clear that, for me at least, the leather jacket is indicative of the masculine lineages of patronage and power that academia preserves. Men inhabit the hides of dead animals as fetishes, living symbolically in the skins of their masters, hoping that they will speak to them: that they will creak.³ But this insight has a wider application. In modernity, everyday objects are never truly our own. They participate in other systems of meaning and belong to other lives most of which we are only dimly aware.

There is always more than one side to the everyday. On the one hand, the quotidian means the unconscious forgotten moments of the day: in this case, the sleepy, half-dreaming experience of the early train. On the other, everyday life in modernity means to be subject to vast systems over which we have little control: the railway timetable, for example; or in this instance, the lost property system of Network Rail, which can redeem forgotten articles of clothing and make their owner whole once again. Modernist art too was engaged in collecting what had fallen from use and reconfiguring as part of the process of 'making it new.'⁴ In both cases, modern systems and modernist art, there is a gendered dimension.⁵ In this anecdote, men wear the skins and negligently let them fall, while women pick them up, keep them safe and ready for collection. For Dorothy Richardson, women are routinely engaged in the work of reclamation: "It is as big an art as any other...women work at it the whole of the time. Not one man in a million is aware of it. It's like air within air."⁶ Many of the institutions of the modern age perform a similar role of care or, potentially, destruction: like the railway, they have the power to return us safely home or to carry us away. In fact, the modern quotidian is a such dense and complex thing that it raises the question of whether the everyday is actually a modern invention.⁷

Does the modern age produce the everyday as a distinct experience? And, if this is the case, what is the mechanism that distances us from it so that it becomes distinct or separate: alienation; disenchantment; self-reflexivity? Each of these gives rise to the everyday as a double-sided or dialectical phenomenon: both the forgotten and the taken care of; the mundane and the condition for transformation, illumination or epiphany; experience as both that which happens to us and a process we enact. Is modernity's recognition of the everyday the product of a democratic impulse, where ordinary lives at last become worthy of representation? The promise of happiness would then be not just the recognition of the everyday but the prospect that it could be good. Or does what Jürgen Habermas calls the systems world colonise our private lives, disciplining and

regulating even our innermost consciousness? Modernism struggled with these questions at a time when the politics of everyday life manifested itself in every sphere of culture. The recent exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, *Modernism 1914-1939: Designing a New World*, demonstrated how modernism developed from the avant-garde to penetrate every aspect of twentieth-century life, from advertising, to cinema to the fitted kitchen.⁸ This issue of *Modernist Cultures* is devoted to exploring some of the key issues in the relationship between modernism and the everyday: the question of defamiliarisation; of experience and the commodity world; the everyday as an embodied experience; the dissonance and confusion that the modern engenders as an everyday experience; and the aesthetic and political responses to which new encounters with the modern give rise.

Perhaps modernism's most important formal contribution to the recognition of the everyday as a distinct phenomenon is its insistence on estrangement. Making strange defines the ordinary as a worthwhile object, even as it acknowledges what it lacks. In the first article of this issue, "Modernist Fiction and 'the accumulation of unrecorded life,'" Ella Ophir addresses this aspect of modernism directly, but corrects the view that sees it as starting with formally modernist texts. The romantics were already critical of the tedious and repetitive character of everyday life. As Laurie Langbauer has argued, the nineteenth-century novel took the undistinguished life as its focus.⁹ Modernist fiction, however, intensifies the critique of its neglect and, at the same time, blasts its inadequacy, offering an alternative aesthetic as its redemption. While one of literature's techniques is to re-present objects in a new light, its aim is to offer "witness to tracts of life otherwise lost" (Ophir).¹⁰ In other words, modernism's urge to make things new is driven by a distinctly democratic impulse. This is not to say, however, that that impulse necessarily results in an egalitarian aesthetic. Ophir gives the example of Woolf's social prejudices; but we might also point to the representation of Françoise in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* or, as Lois Cucullu argues in this issue, the desire for distinction exhibited by Miriam Henderson in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*. In Proust, Françoise's discomforts are minutely documented, but she never escapes from the limitations of her position or the constraints of Marcel's gaze. Miriam is caught between the prejudices of her upbringing and the opportunities London offers for a transformed everyday. Once defined, the everyday reveals itself as far from uniform. It includes both extreme and unremarkable experiences. It can offer a way beyond ordinary life or a place of familiarity and restoration. In this respect, Ophir argues, modernism's engagement with the everyday marks not a break, but a continuation of many of the concerns of the novel.

If modernism's formal response to the everyday is estrangement, it might be argued that this is no more than to mimic the magical and phantasmal forms that are the products of capitalist modernity. The commodity lies at the centre of modern pleasures, but also, as Gail McDonald tells us, in "Product Placement: Literary Modernism and Crisco," at the heart of modern ordinariness. In recent years the market has taken centre-stage in debates in modernist studies. The binaries that separated art from the market and the avant-garde from advertising have been deconstructed to reveal a more complex picture of influence, borrowing and complicity. In a witty and incisive argument that takes the cooking fat, Crisco, as its object, McDonald argues for the relevance of the 'marketing-model' to modernist studies, but also identifies its limits. Pound's denunciation of the audience exhibits the ambivalence felt by all who are forced to live with commodification. While a market-based approach opens up modernism, it can also fail to see a modernist aesthetic as a humane response to the inhumanity of a purely economic logic. The 'other-worldly' in modernism both draws us to its aesthetic and promises more.

The everyday is not then, as it seems. The commodity is itself a double-sided concept, incorporating both use value and exchange value. The lived experience of the everyday, like Pound's modernism, has to negotiate such contradictions. Modernist texts have, not surprisingly, concentrated on the body as the site where they are acted out. *Ulysses* is the pioneering text in this regard, although *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is perhaps equal in its focus on embodied experience. Beckett is unique in his reading of both Joyce and Proust, and in his own writing of the body as the unstable point at which regulation and action meet. In her essay, "Beckett, Bourdieu and the Resistance to Consumption," Liz Barry argues that Beckett's characters offer a "robust challenge" to such the regulatory systems of modernity. Where Pound rejects his audience, denying their right to consume, Beckett's bodies resist "the act of consumption itself." Objects in

Beckett are not just defamiliarised, they are unworkable. They can neither be exchanged nor used, except provisionally, so that the making and remaking of the everyday world is brought painfully to the fore. Beckett's 'impropriety' goes to the root of that word, rejecting the world of the propertied, the normalisation of bourgeois values. In so doing it opens up a gap in which very little offers the opposite of cultural impoverishment.

Lack, in this case actual hunger, acts in a very different way in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*. Eating (or what Luce Girard calls "alimentary protocols") crosses all divisions, argues Lois Cucullu in her essay, "Over-Eating: *Pilgrimage's* Food Mania and the *Flânerie* of Public Foraging." Despite Miriam's plunge into London's democratising public sphere, she strives to maintain her sense of distinction, even amongst the newly industrialised cafés and restaurants that were emerging in the period. Cucullu describes the double affect of this as the lived experience of everyday life. On the one hand, Miriam's identity is produced through her labour; on the other, "the novel...exempts Miriam's own discriminatory practices as matters of taste or intellect, and hence entitlement." For Cucullu, Miriam participates in a new and exclusive community, representative of knowledge and expert cultures.¹¹ The systems world, the world that structures lived experience in urban environments, exerts an organisational power, which connects to and affects the most basic corporeal rhythms. Cucullu's version of Richardson's London, "one woman's city," continues a debate about modernism's elitism that is unlikely to end in the near future. And there is no doubt that what Walter Benjamin calls the "shock effect" of urban modernity can indeed provoke an impulse towards concentration and exclusion – an attempt to create a new order of things. But there are other options.

The scatter and confusion of the modern everyday, the state Proust describes as *désagrégé* (literally disaggregated) and Benjamin, quite possibly following Proust, calls *Zerstreuung* (which also means absentmindedness) can lead to both retreat and creative responses; often, as in *Pilgrimage*, in the same text. One such is that of Marianne Moore. In her essay, "'Just Looking' at the Everyday: Marianne Moore's Exotic Modernism," Victoria Bazin argues that Moore was a connoisseur of modern clutter, drawing on the historical residues of "antiques, rare art objects and ancient artefacts", but also the disorder of the information age: the disaggregated fragments thrown up by contemporary journalism. Bazin returns to the question of defamiliarisation, but like Ophir questions a clear division between routine and 'making it new.' Moore's poetry operates a productive dialectic between exoticism and the everyday through a mode of collecting not unlike that used by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*. Benjamin's use of the dialectical image might be seen as the right way to perceive the double-sided nature of the everyday. The dialectical image retrieves an object, practice or allegorical figure from obscurity: a leather jacket perhaps; *flânerie*; the collector. It re-establishes what is lost in a new constellation, one which recognises its interconnectedness with the systems world, but which, at the same time, offers the possibility of its transfiguration.¹² Moore takes the "discursive production of 'China' in the *Illustrated London News*" (Bazin) and creates a constellation that goes further than the confirmation of the West as a "superior site of knowledge" to gesture to something beyond a technocratic modernity.

Moore's poetic, like Benjamin's, draws in historical remnants and finds that are made new by modernity. This vision goes against a uni-dimensional view of modernism as concerned only with the present (a constraint that also adheres to recent criticism that privileges the marketing-model of modernism). In the final essay of the issue, "Hopscotch Modernism," Ben Highmore reminds us that modernism makes sense within the *longue durée* as well as the present moment. The children's game of hopscotch (which persists on the pavement I can see from my study window) is an example of everyday practice that reaches back into antiquity. Modernist literature and art were far from the only ways of seeing that were concerned to rescue the everyday and give it significance. As Highmore explains, anthropologists and ethnographers were engaged in comparable projects. Writers such as Roger Caillois, who wrote on hopscotch, crossed generic and disciplinary boundaries. Small-scale institutions, such as the Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham, South London, attempted to synthesise systemic knowledge with a belief in learning through play and spontaneous (non-systemic) social interactions. Such experiments, the origins of the *Collège de Sociologie*, and twentieth-century studies of working-class culture (including the post-war emergence of Cultural Studies) might all be seen as part of what Highmore calls "a modernist heritage."

Thus the issue's concluding essay brings us back to the practical everyday. If modernist art can suggest or, more often, provoke a form of politics, an example like the Peckham Health Centre offers a form of intervention into the everyday that seeks to effect its actual transformation using the lived experience of its users. Some of the more progressive aspects of the British welfare state might be seen in this light – although its implementation has not usually been so democratic in its practice or philosophy. Politically, attention to the everyday can seem quietist. Michel De Certeau's 'tactics' can be read as modes of accommodation. But it is important to remember that such tactics were not conceived as an alternative, but in relation to, the limitations of the strategic perspective. Modernism's continual, almost anxious, perhaps neurotic, return to the everyday represents one of its most productive and creative concerns; the desire, perhaps human need, to measure the grand designs that are modernism's public face against culture as Raymond Williams' "way of life".

Notes

¹ The papers in this issue of *Modernist Cultures* originate from three separate sessions at MSA5.

² This is what Bill Brown calls "what is excessive in objects...what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idol, and totems." See Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28: 2 (Fall 2001): 5.

³ For an insightful account of the symbolism of skin see Steven Connor, "Integuments: the scar, the sheen, the screen," *new formations* 39 (Winter 1999-2000): 33-54.

⁴ According to John Frow, for Henri Lefebvre "*le quotidien* is at one level nothing by residue." See John Frow, "'Never Draw and Insight Straight': On Everyday Knowledge," *New Literary History* 33 (Autumn, 2002): 630.

⁵ As Rita Felski states in her introduction to the special issue of *New Literary History* on the concept of everyday life, "metaphors of everyday time are intricately intertwined with metaphors of gender." See "Introduction," *New Literary History* 33: 4 (Autumn 2002): 612. See also Rita Felski, *Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁶ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage* vol. 3 ([1923] London: Virago, 1979), 257.

⁷ See Rita Felski, "The Invention of Everyday Life," *new formations* 39 (Winter 1999-2000): 13-31. Felski's article is the starting point for many of the contributions to this issue of *Modernist Cultures*, but it should be read as part of a wider reappraisal of the everyday in critical theory. See the special issues of *Critical Inquiry* 28: 2 (Fall 2001), *New Literary History* 33: 4 (Autumn 2002), *Cultural Critique* 52 (Fall 2002), and Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁸ See Christopher Wilk, ed., *Modernism 1914-1939: Designing a New World* (London: V&A Publications, 2006).

⁹ Laurie Langbauer, *Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction 1850-1930* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ See Brown on this point, 2001: 12.

¹¹ Lois Cucullu, *Expert Modernists, Matricide and Modern Culture: Woolf, Forster, Joyce* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹² Buse et. al, *Benjamin's Arcades: An Unguided Tour* (Manchester University Press, 2006), 31.